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Reflections for institutional change and professional
development**

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Supporting the evaluation of academic practices: Reflections for institutional change and professional development

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, ten principles for evaluating blended teaching and learning in an age of Covid-19 (Austen, 2020) are discussed with specific suggestions for academic practice/practitioners; evaluation strategy, student involvement, rationale for change, comparisons, data types, standards of evidence, indicators of success, evaluation research, review, resource, and capacity. The initial reflections (July 2020) focused on supporting the higher education sector with institution-wide evaluations, as this was the strategic and regulatory pressure at that time. However, institutional evaluations are only possible if they are informed by a local evidence base. In this opinion piece, the ten evaluative principles are reframed to encourage evaluative thinking by academic practitioners, and particularly those defined as early adopters. This piece encourages institutions and practitioners to reframe an emphasis on evaluation methods into a critical space of evaluative thinking while appreciating the contingent factors of their institution and its stakeholders.

Keywords: evaluation, evaluative thinking, academic practice, institutional change, professional development

Introduction

In July 2020 I conducted a literature review and presented ten principles for evaluating blended teaching and learning in an age of Covid-19 (Austen, 2020). My reflections focused on supporting the higher education sector with institution-wide evaluations, as this was the strategic and regulatory pressure at that time. However, institutional evaluations are only possible if they are fed by a local evidence base. In this opinion piece, I reframe my ten evaluative principles to encourage evaluative thinking by academic practitioners, and particularly those defined as early adopters in the context of the transition to remote/blended learning.

Ten years ago, there was a dearth of literature on academic practice and blended learning (Torrissi-Steele & Drew, 2013). Now, there is a plethora of sector wide, open access resources aimed at those adapting their practices during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic (see curation by Association for Learning Technology/ALT). The focus on practice, championed by a variety of stakeholders, has been on design and delivery; this does not mean that academic practices remain un-evaluated. Many existing evaluative methods will have been utilised including learning analytics (monitoring); institutional surveys (benchmarking); quality reviews (assurance); self/peer, informal/ongoing reflections (developmental); and commissioned development projects and action research (enhancement). Some of these methods already amplify student voices (Austen 2020). This piece encourages institutions and practitioners to *reframe an emphasis on evaluation methods into a critical space of evaluative thinking while* appreciating the contingent factors of their institution and its stakeholders.

Evaluation strategy

Evaluation should be a shared responsibility. Academic practitioners may feel that they are carrying this responsibility alone. The institution should strategically position and support the importance of evaluative thinking at all levels (see Graham et al., 2013 for an institutional evaluation checklist). Internal comparisons by rating Courses / Departments using standardised (yet unreliable) measures and Key Performance Indicators may not be the best approach to foster evaluative thinking, although it may inspire some to collect their own evaluative data to counter, defend or provide essential practice-based context.

Student involvement

Student experiences of the Covid-19 transition to blended learning have been wide-ranging and conflicting, heavily influenced by course context, individual circumstances, and perceptions of risk. The instruments used to hear student voices which aid action and

response, may no longer be fit for a blended context (Savoie-Roskos, 2018). To explore the nuances of these reflections, participatory approaches (Kara, 2015) to evaluating academic practices are encouraged. These approaches would seek the views of participants (students) in the proposed design and methods of voice seeking activities. The aim of this approach to evaluation is to benefit the participants (students) and the evaluators (staff) to co-create knowledge, increase the “legitimacy of evaluation outcomes” and develop “student ownership” (Bovill & Woolmer, 2020: 84)

Rationale for change

Sound evaluations will consider the rationale for change and assumptions about impact before implementation. During the Covid-19 transition to remote/blended learning, the ‘why’ was structurally imposed, the rationale was adopted rather than developed, and assumptions about impact focused on mitigation rather than opportunity. Although Covid is an obvious example, it is not uncommon for change to be imposed or rationales to be ambiguous. To avoid change fatigue, practice-based decisions should be positively framed to enable actors to take control of the ‘how?’ and the ‘what?’, and to set realistic outcomes with contextual statements of indicative success.

Comparisons and causality

During the early stages of a transition, academic practitioners may look to compare delivery models (remote/blended vs on campus/face to face) pre and post transition. By neglecting to explore “instructional method and learner characteristics”, Surry and David Ensminger (2001: 33, in Hodges et al., 2020) suggest that “there are too many confounding variables in even the best media comparison study for the results to be valid and meaningful”. Some evaluation approaches would encourage the comparison of two or more controlled environments to establish cause and effect, for example, if blended delivery models are leading to better student outcomes. Evaluations which are aligned to the realist tradition¹ focus on the context and theory of practices and are better suited to complex changes. Learning from, but not comparing to, the pre-transition teaching and learning context might be a better approach.

Data types

Formative and summative evaluations of practice may already exist within an institution, but few disrupt the data hierarchy by challenging the dominance of quantitative data and placing practitioner reflections (Crockford, 2020) at the top of the pyramid. When changes happen rapidly or are unexpected, definitions of success may need to be amended. This is a good opportunity to validate practitioner reflections as authentic within an emerging evidence base, especially those who are early adopters. Space for storytelling is encouraged to empower those telling their story and to engage those who will listen (see Austen & Jones-Devitt, 2018).

Standards of evidence

The Office for Students’ Standards of Evidence - narrative, empirical, causal – provide a framework to support evaluations of impact (Office for Students, 2019). Early adopters are critical to the documentation of a coherent description of blended learning and the specifics of implementation. Those invested in experimentation and innovation may have researched the approach and any previous evidence of impact. This stage of narrative evidence gathering secures a trajectory toward empirical evaluation. Institutions should be comfortable with the short-term constraints of evidencing impact and support the development of a strong explanatory narrative.

Indicators of success

Envisage who is defining ‘success’ and critique experience/engagement assumptions. Measures of impact for the practices within a blended model may be distinct from previous/alternative models and vary according to role/context. Evaluative data collection will need to set clear parameters and a focus for evaluative reporting. Consider whether the following are within the scope of such evaluative thinking and what the associated indicators of success may be: the learning environment (e.g. practitioner reflections on the suitability of online tools for specific teaching activities); the process of learning (e.g. student engagement with created/curated content); learning outcomes (e.g. grades and marks attributed to online examinations); process outcomes (e.g. staff attendance at virtual capacity building workshops).

Evaluation research

¹ Harrison and Waller’s principles (2017) can be applied from access to student success contexts.

Institutions should be supporting dedicated evaluation research on the experience and outcomes of contextual transitions to blended learning. This should include funding and realistic resource allocations which allows proportionate exploration (Parsons, 2017) without over-burden. There is value in early pilot studies which build into further pedagogic evaluation research. This evidence base will enable decisions about scaling up (or not) and provide a scholarship route into publication for academic practitioners. Engaging with ethical approval processes ensure that evaluation research is not exploiting or coercing participants (often students) and can open the scope for publication beyond the foci institution. Reflective case studies are a good starting point.

Integrative review

During the development of new practices, evaluative thinking should continuously review the evidence used. Positioning early adopters as key stakeholders, for example within a blended learning expert steering group, can create ownership, further empower the creation of an evidence base, and support capacity building across an institution (Jones-Devitt et al., 2017). This can also foster criticality and provide space for the discussion of unintended outcomes.

Resource and capacity

Evaluation is central to academic practice, yet this is often a hidden expectation and an assumed skill set. Institutions should value their practitioners by making time for embedded, continuous, evaluation activity and appropriate professional development in how to develop evaluative thinking.

Conclusion

This opinion piece has promoted the importance of evaluative thinking by framing evaluation as central to applied academic practice in the context of remote/blended learning. These recommendations emerge from an immersion in practice, theorising and capacity building experiences. Hopefully, they inspire critical conversations about the evaluation of academic practice, using the lessons learnt from Covid-19 as an experiential anchor.

Biography

Liz Austen is Head of Evaluation and Research, Sheffield Hallam University with an effective track record in evaluation research and for driving pedagogic innovation for the University, and as an independent consultant. She currently leads Sheffield Hallam's institutional evaluation of the transition to blended learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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